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ABSTRACT

A combination of experiential education and residential camping can have positive effects on preschool children with emotional, behavioral, and learning problems. Preschool Prep at Ramapo Anchorage Camp (Rhinebeck, New York) was developed to meet the specific needs of high-risk children aged 4-6. Many of the children come from unsafe urban neighborhoods and poor families. About 63 percent of campers are boys, 40 percent are black, and 39 percent are Latino. During 3-week summer sessions, the children live in small groups in rustic cabins and experience a wide variety of educational, outdoor, athletic, and creative activities. Children learn to live in a group and play cooperatively, enhance their verbal skills, and expand their physical activities. The camp focuses on teaching values, and a one-to-one counselor-camper ratio provides significant adult-child interaction. A systematic program evaluation was conducted during the summers of 1995-98. The results indicate that a short-term specialized camping experience can effectively help young children develop age-appropriate social, self-help, communication, and motor skills. Vignettes describe the successes of individual campers and the dedication of staff. (SV)

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ED 438 135

Residential Camping for at Risk Preschoolers

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Abstract: A combination of experiential education and residential camping can have positive effects on preschool-age children with emotional, behavioral and learning problems. Outdoor physical and sensory activities such as running, climbing, touching, tasting, and smelling are vital to growth and development and best experienced in natural settings (Rivkin, 1997; Moore, 1993). Positive effects of such activities on young children include better social relationships and improved physical well being (Rivkin, 1997; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

Growing up in New York City and other urban areas is challenging and stressful. Poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, television, the failure of public schooling, and parental obligations outside the home all contribute to a dearth of opportunities for young children to participate in meaningful outdoor experiences.

Preschool Prep at Ramapo Anchorage Camp is an innovative, short-term program which enables young troubled children to participate in planned and structured educational and recreational experiences in a natural, outdoor environment. Utilizing a carefully planned curriculum and young, enthusiastic and caring staff, the camp offers a one-to-one counselor to camper ratio, which allows for significant adult interaction in the children"s programming.

A systematic program evaluation, assessing the quality of the program and its impact on campers was conducted during the summers of 1995-1998. The results of this study indicate that a short-term specialized camping experience can effectively help children develop age-appropriate communication skills, social skills, self-help skills, and motor skills.

Living in an impoverished area of New York City, Lisa's teenage mother was so fearful for her safety that she kept her indoors for most of her young life, allowing her to venture no further than the small, dark hallway of their apartment building. Upon entering preschool, Lisa's gross motor skills were severely delayed, she had difficulty expressing

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her needs verbally, she was frightened of and easily intimidated by other children, and she clung incessantly to adults.

At age five, Lisa was referred to Ramapo Anchorage Camp by her Head Start agency, which predominantly serves children with significant learning problems. Initially reluctant to participate in activities, it took several days for her to be willing to let go of her counselor's hand. Slowly, and with the help and encouragement of her counselors, she learned to run, climb, hike in the woods and swim in deep water. One summer later, she is frequently seen laughing and playing with her bunkmates or calling from the top of a jungle gym, "Hey! Look at me."

This vignette offers insight into the type of children Ramapo Anchorage Camp works with and the positive effects that a combination of experiential education and residential camping can have on preschool-age children with emotional, behavioral and learning problems. Interaction with the natural world can provide pleasure, leisure and reduced stress levels (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). These types of interactions are particularly beneficial to preschool-aged children, since they learn about the world through physical and sensory experiences (Rivkin, 1997). Outdoor physical and sensory activities such as running, shouting, climbing, touching, tasting, and smelling are vital to growth and development and best experienced in natural settings (Rivkin, 1997; Moore, 1993). Immediate effects of such activities on young children include improved social relationships and an increase in creative play (Moore & Wong, 1997). Long-term benefits appear to be: greater contentment in personal and work-related situations and improved physical well being (Rivkin, 1997; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

In this monograph, we will:

Identify the need for innovative services for young children at risk

Describe the program at Ramapo Anchorage Camp

Detail the study of this unique program and its documented successes

Growing up in New York City and other urban areas is challenging and stressful. Poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, shrinkage of public support systems, failing public schools and substance abuse have negatively impacted generations of family members. Extended family resources are often too strained to compensate adequately for the limitations of parents to care for their children. In addition, the increase of parental obligations outside of the home has left many young children lacking the adult supervision needed to play safely in their own neighborhoods.

The urbanization of America has taken its toll on our youngest children in various ways (Rivkin, 1997). Buildings and roads have replaced natural environments, and the

ensuing traffic presents a variety of dangers for young children (Rivkin, 1997). The popularity of television contributes to a decline in children's outdoor activities, as do video games, electronic games and computers, which are frequently used as "babysitters" when parents are unwilling or unable to supervise children themselves (Rivkin, 1997). Moreover, the asphalt and concrete play areas available in many public school and urban environments impede programs from providing children with meaningful natural, outdoor experiences (Rivkin, 1997).

As a result, children now have fewer opportunities to reap the benefits associated with outdoor experiences, such as the development of gross and perceptual-motor skills, improved health, and positive interactions with the natural world (Rivkin, 1997). The National Association for the Education of Young Children asserts that since children with greater access to the outdoors participate in more activities involving physical movement, they are better able to acquire skills needed to safely and independently navigate their environment. This is of particular importance to children under the age of eight who, developmentally, gain their knowledge through hands-on interaction with their environment. Furthermore, for young children with emotional and behavioral problems, participating in an outdoor experiential program allows them to release excess energy, focus attention, and express themselves in an accepting environment.

Preschool Prep at Ramapo Anchorage Camp

Preschool Prep is one of six programs offered at Ramapo Anchorage Camp in Rhinebeck, New York. Founded in 1922, Ramapo is a nationally recognized, residential camping program which annually serves over 1600 at-risk children from early childhood through adolescence. Ramapo's mission is to serve children with a wide range of emotional, behavioral and learning problems in a natural, outdoor environment, providing educational and recreational experiences which promote social, emotional, physical and intellectual growth.

Preschool Prep was developed to meet the specific needs of children ages four through six years. The only program of its kind, Preschool Prep provides young children at risk of school failure with a fun-filled learning experience that supports their individual developmental needs and prepares them to return home and enter school with improved readiness and social skills. Since its inception in 1972, Preschool Prep has grown from a two-week respite for 12 children to a model summer program serving 120 children each summer. Utilizing well-planned and structured activities, the staff focuses on improving each child's basic skills in five areas: language/communication, social/emotional development, self-help, motor skills, and school readiness, with a particular emphasis on interpersonal communication and the building of healthy relationships.

In addition to offering a multitude of outdoor activities, Ramapo's Preschool Prep program provides an informal, family-like setting in which adults work with children to help them attain social-emotional and communication skills applicable to both home and school. Studies show that the most productive learning environments involve the interactive experiences that Ramapo's community setting provides (Frede, 1995).

A wide range of carefully structured activities within a predictable daily routine meets the needs and interests of individual children and helps them to acquire specific skills. Each child receives two hours of small group educational instruction per day in the Preschool Learning Center as well as one hour per day of swim instruction. Other activities include boating, hiking, athletics, low ropes course experiences, initiative games, nature walks and gross motor and free play time in uniquely designed playgrounds. Creative opportunities are offered through arts and crafts, ceramics, woodcraft, music and drama activities. Camp is equipped with roller-skating facilities, gymnasiums, a computer center, and an open-air amphitheater for get-togethers and sing-alongs. Ramapo also sponsors off-campus trips to nearby points of interest such as a farm for strawberry and blueberry picking or to the Rhinebeck Center for Performing Arts for puppet shows.

During the summer, campers participate in one or more of three, three-week sessions and live in rustic cabins with six children and five staff members. During this time, children learn to live within a group, play cooperatively, enhance their verbal skills and expand their physical abilities. Camp focuses on teaching values such as honesty, concern for others, responsibility and the courage to do one's best. A one-to-one ratio of counselors-to-campers enables each child to build healthy relationships, increase self-esteem and improve learning skills. Research supports the long-range benefits of early childhood programs with child-to-adult ratios of at least 7:1 (Frede, 1995), particularly for children with special needs.

During the school year, agencies serving very young, vulnerable children have the opportunity to bring groups of children, teachers, staff and parent volunteers to Camp for four-day residential experiences which provide similar benefits in a modified format. In addition to building community among children, parents and agency staff, Preschool Prep programs during the school year model effective techniques for supporting young children's development, promoting skill acquisition and managing challenging behaviors. Long-range studies indicate that programs like Preschool Prep (i.e., Head Start) have immediate positive effects on participating children and their families (Schweinhart, 1993).

Our Campers

Sarah is six years old. For the past five months, she has lived with her mother in a shelter for battered families in Queens. Sarah's mother sustained serious injuries at the hand of Sarah's father, who is now in prison. A quiet and frightened child, Sarah witnessed a great deal of abuse at home and now has frequent nightmares and panics when she is around men.

During her first week at Ramapo, Sarah was exceedingly shy and reluctant to participate. Her second week's performance was improved, although she continued to struggle with the expectations of her counselors. They would strongly encourage her to participate in activities, play with her peers and dress and wash herself. Gradually, Sarah's resistance faded. During her last week at Ramapo, Sarah stunned her counselors on several occasions. She "read" a picture book to a younger child in the Preschool Reading Center, participated in an overnight in the woods, and performed with her bunkmates in the Camper Talent Show. On the last day of camp, Family Visiting Day, Sarah excitedly pulled her astonished mother from one activity to another. She confidently showed off newly acquired skills such as roller-skating, dressing independently, making her bed, setting the table, and effectively using a knife and fork to cut her food.

Corresponding with the mission of Ramapo, the children referred to Preschool Prep demonstrate emerging learning, social, emotional and/or behavioral problems. The core group of agencies who refer children to Camp serve primarily inner-city ethnic minority children from low-income families. Agencies typically refer children from programs such as specialized day care centers, Head Starts, and day cares affiliated with battered women's shelters, mental health clinics and preventive services (programs serving families who are in danger of having children removed from the home). While the majority of these agencies are located in New York City, several are based in New York's Hudson Valley. A recruitment letter sent to agencies asks them to refer children "who are having difficulties at home or in school," with preference given to "children and families in crisis and children with special needs." Agency directors tend to select the children who are most difficult to manage at home and in school and/or who are at risk of being removed from their families.

Parents/caregivers, teachers, and social service professionals report that most children selected to participate have experienced a variety of difficult circumstances such as poverty or neglect, homelessness, physical or sexual abuse, and other extreme traumatic events. The parents may be deceased, terminally ill, unemployed, incarcerated or hospitalized for a mental illness. Campers often demonstrate one or more of the following: poor interaction with peers, depression, low self-esteem, limited attention span, poor

impulse and body control, low tolerance for frustration, hyperactivity, limited communication ability, auditory processing problems, difficulty adjusting to new situations, infantile behaviors, academic struggles, inappropriate affect, and oppositional or self-destructive behaviors.

In terms of the demographic characteristics of the children served at Ramapo Anchorage Camp, approximately 37% of Preschool Prep campers are girls and 63% are boys. They are primarily from families of low socioeconomic status; approximately 40% are Black, 39% are Latino, 19% are Caucasian, and 2% are of other ethnicity. Given that the majority of families can not pay for this kind of program, individuals and foundations contribute over 90% of the funds necessary to support Preschool Prep. All Preschool Prep families pay a nominal fee based on family income and need.

Staff

A tall, athletic and strong-willed woman from Wheeling, West Virginia, Anne completed her sophomore year at Duke University a month ago and headed north to test her interest in psychology and teaching as a counselor at Ramapo. Anne couldn't believe the campers had arrived only a week ago. Even after eight intense days and nights of training, she felt amazed at the amount of energy, enthusiasm, and caring attention the boys in her bunk required of her.

She had never imagined it could be this hard — working from 8 a.m. until sometimes midnight with just two free hours—coping with the challenge of living and working with four other counselors—developing a consistent set of values and expectations so that, together as a team, they can teach campers valuable skills and show them how to have fun—learning to deal with and respond to supervisors who are constantly asking her to reach beyond her limits.

Anne thought about leaving several times over the ten-week experience, once even to the point of packing her bag. Each time, though, something happened to change her mind: One night, Michael, who rarely participated at a bunk meeting, told her that his favorite part of the day was playing with her at the sandbox. Another day, Paul finally learned to tie his shoes. Several days later, Corey, at a moment of frustration, was successfully prevented from having a tantrum. And, one morning, after changing "pissy sheets," she and her co-counselors found themselves doubled over with laughter. These types of experiences reminded her why she had come to camp and helped her to realize how much she was learning, not only about working with vulnerable preschoolers, but especially about herself.

The staff of the Preschool Prep program consists primarily of high school graduates and college students who are interested in working with fragile children in an outdoor environment and are interested in pursuing careers in early childhood, elementary or special education, social work and psychology. For this program, 35 counselors and six supervisors are employed to supervise approximately 40 young children in each of three three-week sessions. The staff is geographically and ethnically diverse and represents some of the most prestigious universities in the country, as well as some of New York's top high schools. In addition, Ramapo Anchorage Camp is a community partner with the Corporation for National Service, AmeriCorps.

Staff members report that they were drawn to Ramapo by their interest in working with troubled children and their desire to influence children's lives. Ramapo selects staff members based on their leadership potential, personal values, and ability to demonstrate the caring attitude necessary to relate to and motivate young children.

All counselors and supervisors participate in six full days of orientation prior to the children's arrival. They also receive intensive supervision and ongoing training by the camp's supervisory staff while programs are in session.

Evaluation of the Ramapo Program

Anecdotal reports from those who have participated in the Preschool Prep program, including children, parents, staff, agencies, and camp administrators indicate that the program is extremely successful in achieving its goal of helping young children. To support these accounts, in 1995, a systematic program evaluation was begun. The purpose of this series of studies is to improve the quality of the camp program by examining its impact on the campers. The first study was conducted on the Preschool Prep program. It was hypothesized that the children would demonstrate significant changes in the following areas, corresponding with the camp curriculum: communication, social skills, self-help skills, motor skills, and basic camp living skills. Following is a description of this study:

Method Participants

All children between the ages of four and six years old who attended the Preschool Prep Program at Ramapo Anchorage Camp between 1995 and 1998 were included in this study. All children attended camp for at least one three week session. Children who attended camp for more than one session were only included for their first session. The demographic characteristics and emotional and behavioral problems of the children have already been described above.

Assessment

An instrument to assess children's development and behavior at camp was developed by the camp staff and Board of Directors, including several educators and psychologists with expertise in program evaluation research. It was developed for two purposes: (1) to assess preschool children's development, behavior, and adaptive skills and (2) to train staff to foster the development of these skills in the children.

The instrument is actually based on the curriculum developed for the camp of the Preschool Prep Program. In the late 1980's, the camp's director began reviewing the literature on those preschool age skills that are important and predictive of future success in school and social adaptation. This information was to be used to develop a practical, age-appropriate curriculum for the camp staff to use in their work. The resulting curriculum, behaviorally specific and skills-oriented, is informally referred to as the Camper Guide. (The formal title is Assessing Essential Life Skills: A Guide to Working with Young Children at Ramapo Anchorage Camp.) This instrument, consisting of 123 items, assesses skills in the following areas: (1) Communication (e.g., expressing needs, feelings and ideas); (2) Social skills (e.g., ability to interact with children and adults in an appropriate manner); (3) Self-help skills (e.g., how to take care of oneself, such as personal hygiene, using eating utensils properly); (4) Motor skills (e.g., running, jumping, kicking a ball), and (5) Camp living skills (e.g., moving through camp in an appropriate manner and taking care of the bunk).

Procedures

Prior to the children's arrival, staff members are trained on the use and application of the Camper Guide. A curriculum has been developed for each particular skill area. Counselors are taught how to observe children, approximate their developmental levels, and how to teach or improve upon identified skills. The Camper Guide is also used to help counselors set goals for work with the children for the session.

The Camper Guide is completed on two occasions: three days after the children arrive at camp and two days before the children leave camp. Given that the staff are living with the children and observing their behavior around-the-clock, three days before the initial assessment was considered sufficient for observing skills in each of the target areas. For each child, his or her counselor rates, on a 5-point scale (never, seldom, sometimes, generally, always), how well the child performs each skill; for example, how often a child take turns in games and activities.

Although it may be of some concern that the data was not compiled by impartial out-

side observers, we greatly respect the way in which our counselor staff diligently approached this task and carefully collected the required information.

Data Analysis

Completed Camper Guides were entered into an SPSS computer database. Statistical analysis of the data was performed to 1) create scores representing the different skill areas that were reliable (factor analysis), and 2) examine changes in children's skill levels from the beginning to the end of camp (paired t-test comparisons).

Results

The Camper Guide was completed (pre- and post-test) at least once for 358 children. This data was used to evaluate the reliability of the instrument and to develop scales to assess whether there were changes in behavior from pre-test to post-test.

Scaled Development

The procedure for scale development was as follows:

First, items with low response rates were eliminated. Several items in the original score were difficult to observe, especially at pre-test. In order to evaluate change, only those behaviors that were reasonably observable at both time points were included.

The 123 items were originally conceptualized as covering 5 domains: communication, social skills, self-help skills, motor skills, and camp skills. For each domain, correlation of each item with the other items was examined. Items with correlations below .40 at either pre-test or post-test were eliminated, since they did not correlate strongly enough with the other items in that domain. The result was five Total Scale Scores for each of the five domains that had high internal consistency (i.e. reliability).

A separate factor analysis was conducted on the items for each of the five Total Scale Scores (principal components extraction with Varimax rotation) to assess whether there were meaningful subscales that could also be used. As a result of the factor analysis, three subscales in the Communication domain (conversation, information, and feelings), two subscales in the Self-Help domain (eating and dressing), and two subscales in the Social Skills domain (following directions and rules/respect) were developed.

Thus, in total, there were 12 scaled scores. Given our approach, it is not surprising that the reliabilities for these 12 scales were high for the sample, since high internal consistency within that sample was a criterion for scale development. The average alpha for the 12 scales assessed at pre-test and post-test was .87 and the range was .72 - .96.

Pre-test and Post-test Results

In order to examine the change in children's skill levels in the five domains over the three week period, paired t-tests were conducted to assess whether post-test scores were significantly higher than pre-test scores. With few exceptions, post-test scores were significantly higher than pre-test scores, indicating skill enhancement in almost all areas. More specifically, children changed significantly from the beginning to the end of camp in four of the five major skill areas (Communication, Self-Help, Social skills, and Motor skills), and in five of the seven subcategories (all of the communication subcategories, eating skills, and ability to follow directions and rules).

Study Replication

In 1998, the study design was repeated with another sample of 114 children. All procedures were exactly the same. The 12 scales continued to show high internal consistency with an average alpha of .86 and a range of .68 - .95.

Significant changes from pre-test to post-test were found in all five of the major skill areas, and in all but the same two sub-categories (ts ranged from -2.21, $p < .05$ to -8.20, $p < .001$).

Discussion

Ramapo Anchorage Camp provides a therapeutic residential outdoor experience for children with emotional, behavioral and learning problems. The Preschool Prep Program is one of the only such programs for children ages four to six years.

The results of a program evaluation conducted over the past four years indicate that this three-week program can effectively help children develop age appropriate skills in communication, including conversation skills and the ability to talk about feelings; social skills; self-help skills; motor skills; and the ability to cooperate and live with other children at camp. Thus, the results of this study support the effectiveness of a short-term, specialized camping experience on the development of "at-risk" preschoolers.

These positive results have inspired the Board of Directors, staff and benefactors of Ramapo Anchorage Camp to continue these kinds of studies so as to further increase the quality of the programs provided in order to be of most benefit to very young, needy children and to create an innovative model for replication.

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